**Middle East dynamics and Pakistan**

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With the Indo-Israel nexus flourishing across the region; the eternal ineffectiveness of OIC; and, the diminishing role of religion on geo-politics, Pakistan’s matters of national interest like Kashmir would be difficult to pursue in the coming years in the Middle East. Almost negligible response on Islamabad’s pursuit to get Muslims together on Islamophobia can be taken as a strong indicator in this direction. In order to safeguard its stated geo-economic objectives, Pakistan needs to shape its foreign policy with regard to this all important region particularly in the emerging uncertain geo-political and geo-strategic environment. More importantly, under the circumstances, Islamabad may try to be that ‘reliable partner’ the security-conscious dynasties are earnestly looking for.  
Placing the Middle East and West Asia under one heading, the recently released National Security Policy (NSP) by Islamabad has emphasised the fraternal, religious and economic ties with the GCC countries. Singling out KSA and its ‘multifaceted’ relations with Pakistan in trade, investment, energy, defence and cultural domains, the NSP reiterates Pakistan’s ‘full commitment’ to the security of the two holy sites of Islam while terming the Gulf as a ‘home to millions of Pakistanis.’ As the ground realities are rapidly changing, this text needs a revision to make it pragmatic. Clearly, the Middle East is the next critical challenge for Pakistan.  
GCC countries trade with the world to the tune of $1300 billion. Until recently, this bloc was Pakistan’s top destination of its precious metals, gems and textiles. Pakistan’s share has drastically reduced to mere $18 billion due to low productivity, lack of macroeconomic stability, energy crisis, Covid-19, outdated technology and above all India’s strong entry in the arena. For instance, Pakistan’s exports to UAE have come down from $4 billion in 2012 to $1 billion in 2020. Conversely, GCC countries’ trade with India is gradually increasing and touched $120 billion in 2020, squarely eroding Pakistan’s market share. Even the erstwhile strong supporter like KSA has started behaving somewhat like IMF. The strong terms and conditions of $4.2 billion economic package from KSA in 2021 had come to Islamabad as an expected surprise.  
Unable to find appropriate diversification in its economic resources; diminishing oil reserves and budgetary constraints, the GCC countries find it hard to cope with the alarming double digit unemployment rate. Add into it the adverse effects of Covid-19 and one would understand why thousands of workers have lost jobs and numerous others are looking for other options. Mainly involved in menial jobs, there are around 4 million Pakistanis based in the Gulf who remit an estimated $11.2 billion back home every year. Hit with the upward unemployment trajectory and Saudi ladies being allowed to drive cars, thousands of Pakistan origin drivers are likely to be returning home in not too distant future. On the other hand, the return of Pakistani prisoners from Qatar, KSA and Bahrain must also be seen in the context of finding jobs for them at home. This must be Pakistan’s critical challenge number two.  
Pakistan’s traditional security relations with the Gulf region are fading. The Indo-Israel nexus and formation of the Quartet comprising the US, India, Israel and UAE have changed the Middle Eastern security dynamics to a great extent. Secondly, with regard to internal security or safety of the dynasties or against terrorism, the Gulf region is not wary of attacks from ‘infidels’ any more. Now the assumed threats emanate from Houthis, Muslim Brotherhood, ISIS and Al-Qaida. Losing relevance in the security domain also has something to do with the religion’s diminishing role and the growing indifference to Muslim causes like Palestine and Kashmir particularly at the OIC platform. It is widely believed that after UAE’s recognition of Israel, if KSA follows suit, Pakistan will practically be out of the Middle Eastern geo-political chessboard.  
Pakistan needs to appreciate that focus on geo-economics does not mean ignoring the geo-political realities. Economic and trade activities can hardly be pursued effectively in an uncertain geo-political or geo-strategic environment. Another point that needs better understanding is the recent wave in the Gulf of putting one’s own foreign policy and national interest over all other considerations. The decision of recognising Israel might not resonate with the aims of OIC but fits in well with the geo-strategic future strategic objectives of UAE. What a country like Pakistan needs is the real support either in economic terms or in political terms at a high-stake multilateral forum like FATF. Pakistan not only needs to bring its erstwhile friends like Iran, KSA and UAE back but also develop real-time new friendships.  
In the context of the Gulf region, Pakistan may reflect on re-introducing its real potential in economic, trade and security domains. Besides the official channels, backdoor diplomacy may also be reinvigorated and put to use in achieving the desired results. Looking after the interests of four million Pakistanis in the Gulf may be Islamabad’s priority number one. Additionally, it may utilise its prowess in the IT sector particularly as techno-politics is slowly taking over geo-politics in the region. Tourism and sports are the other promising areas. Pakistan must put its best foot forward, grab the opportunity, further deepen its defence and security relations with the Middle East.